

Foundation of All Good Qualities

Twelfth teaching

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Dhargyey Buddhist Centre

Taking Rebirth

To resume from where we left off, there are many scholar adepts with extrasensory perception who can see their and other people's lifetimes. Furthermore, there are sages from other religious traditions who can remember as many as 80 past lifetimes. As thus mentioned, at the time of death and when we actually take a next rebirth there is nothing except spiritual practice or spiritual virtues that will be of definite benefit. Thus, this is calling upon us to understand the predicament we are in, the uncertainty of our future in the light of which the only thing that we can definitely fall back on is spiritual practice.

Ideally speaking, one should forsake this life. That means, one should forsake the pursuit of material pursuits of this lifetime. Instead, one should direct one's life to doing only genuine quality practice. Why is it that we need to prioritise our life so that we spend out life doing only genuine quality practice? That is because we, one and all, will not cease completely at the point of death. Instead, we cannot help involuntarily taking a next rebirth.

Whilst we would be forced by karma to take rebirth, where are we going to be forced to take rebirth? There are only two places, up or down: higher realms of existence like humans, or lower realms like that of animals and so on. Do we have a choice in selecting the two options? We have no freedom and no control over the choice of our rebirth.

We will have no choice but to be dictated by two types of karma: positive white karma and negative black karma. We have no choice but to follow the karma. What we are exhorted to do is, is to make the most of this wonderful opportunity offered by this lifetime. To use this life to do positive actions and to actively abstain from negative actions in the knowledge that at the crunch time of selection of the next rebirth, it is karma that dictates that selection, not our free will. We have no free will there, it is karma that dictates. In light of this, we are called upon by the compassionate ones to wake up and undertake virtues.

The advice that comes time and again is use this life well in being kind to other people, not to harm other people, make the most of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – once in a blue moon opportunity in the annals of our long-time existence. Whilst this life is so precious and wonderful, it won't easily be found time and again. Not only that, it doesn't last long or give us endless opportunities.

What is the situation at the present? At the present in our mental continuum, the causes which will help achieve higher state of existence are very few. Whereas the causes, negative karma, responsible for unfortunate lower realm rebirths are far too many. How do we know that virtuous causes are far too few and negative causes are far too many in our mindstream? Do we know it empirically or can we deduce from other things? We can deduce that from the ease with which and difficulty with which we find ourselves going negative actions and positive actions. When it comes to getting involved in negative thought, speech and action it doesn't take much effort. In fact, these almost rush through in us with great ease. When it comes to getting involved or doing virtue, do we have the same degree of ease and spontaneity? Or does it take a great deal of effort to do virtue? The ease or difficulty in these two areas will clearly signal this fact.

We were just told a few lines before that we will have no free will in selecting our next rebirth, where will be forced to take rebirth. It will all be determined by karma. So how does karma determine that? There is a mention of that. It says,

Today in this life, whatever positive actions or negative actions we do, at the point of death then going through the twelve links of dependent origination, one of the links will select one of these positive or negative actions and influenced by that action one is conceived in the next life.

One will follow the black or white karma done like a shadow following the body, with no deviations; accordingly one will experience the outcome of the two types of karma that one follows [performs]. This is what the stainless speech of the Buddha in sutra and vinaya texts talk about. The sutras and the vinaya text talk about four salient properties of karma:

- (i) Actions are definite in their result;
- (ii) Actions have exponential quality in increasing their effects;
- (iii) You will never experience the consequence of an action you have not performed;
- (iv) Once an action is performed, its potency is never rendered ineffective.

Talking about the four properties of karma: they are certain, they multiple, you never experience an action you don't perform, and once you perform an action, the potency remains forever until the fruit is ripened. Therefore there is a citation from a sutra that says,

The actions of the embodied sentient beings even after a hundred aeons will not go to waste. With coming to conditions, the time is right, the results the fruits of those actions will inescapably mature.

Of this, another great master Shantideva says, "*The system of karma is inconceivable, only the omniscient can do justice to its complexity.*"

As Shantideva just said, the system of karma is just inconceivable, only the omniscient can do justice to its complexity. Therefore, we really need to gain confidence in the presentation of the complexity of karma, all teachings about karma so that can do a true assessment of our own self: what kind of karma we have performed, positive or negative. If it becomes apparent that there are more negative karmas than positive, we need to immediately turn to the three jewels so that we are immediately saved from falling into one of the three lower realms in the next life. If one does fall due to the force of karma, one will undergo intense excruciating suffering of heat, cold, hunger and stupidity of not knowing that making a meal of each other – as animals do – will further aggravate the karma. Fearing these dark prospects awaiting as a result of negative karma, we have no option but to turn to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

The Fundamental Practice of Refuge

I remember emphasising the fundamental Buddhist practice of refuge, turning to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for protection to save us from the prospect of immediate rebirth in one of the three lower realms. How is it that if you turn to them that we could be saved? Turning to them is one of the four antidotes. Turning to the three jewels is the antidote of reliance, reliance on refuge. When you rely on refuge, the Buddha Dharma and Sangha, we will turn to them with a sense of desperation of falling down. When we turn to them, the three refuges would require us to stop doing bad karma and to purify our mind of the past bad karma, which fortunately is completely purifiable. Once negative karma is purified, new ones are stopped there is no way one will fall down. As a result, one is saved by refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Only yesterday I was talking about the four truths. Of the four truths, the third and fourth truths namely true permanent cessation, liberation from all suffering and causes of suffering and the path which helps us achieve that, together they are called ‘Dharma.’ The scriptures that we have, they are provisional dharma; true dharma is true cessation and true paths. Of the four truths, the last two form one of the three jewels and therefore the Buddhist practice is all connected.

Most people have heard a lot about the three jewels, but do we know the three jewels? Despite having heard the name of three jewels and the practice called refuge in three jewels, I would like to reiterate the three jewels and refuge as a matter of great importance. We need to have precise awareness of what Buddha is, what Dharma is, what Sangha is.

What is *sang gye* – Buddha? ‘Sang’ means total clearance, total freedom of the mind from delusions and negative karma so that the mind will remain ever free from delusions and karma. ‘Gye’ means total expansion, the same mind that is free is fully equipped with the greatest knowledge of the truth. It is reference to the mind, not to the body. So anyone whose mind is free of all delusion including the traces, and whose mind is completely equipped with highest knowledge of the ultimate truth, he or she are a Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha is a prime example. For that matter, there are said to be uncountable number of Buddhas.

What is the jewel of Dharma? It has reference again to the mind, and is defined as a spiritual realisation in the mindstream of an Arya being, which is subsumed by either cessation or path. That is a monastic definition of jewel of Dharma, but to make it simple Dharma is true cessation or true path. True path and true cessation are prime examples, Dharma means that which frees permanently and the state of total freedom; that is Dharma.

The third refuge is Sangha. The jewel of Sangha is a like-minded support system for your spiritual journey. Any person who is on the path to nirvana, to liberation, like you seeking either nirvana or enlightenment for your own sake or all other sentient beings, is your spiritual friend. The need for three jewels for us is likened for the need of a doctor, medication and nurses for a patient needing all-round medical help.

Yesterday I was talking about the four truths: true suffering for Arya beings, origin of suffering for Arya beings, true cessation for Arya beings, true paths for Arya beings. Of the four truths, the first two are what we have, what we experience, what afflict us. Given that, we seek freedom in the form of true permanent cessation and the means which help achieve that permanent cessation. Becoming utterly disillusioned, developing sickening disillusionment with the ongoing samsaric existence in the form of true suffering and true origins which are repeated endlessly, if one seeks true cessation following true path one will succeed in achieving true cessation. One will develop the knowledge of the Dharma so that once nirvana is attained, it is not that you will lose it again. Once nirvana is attained, once enlightenment is attained, it is permanent. Therefore true cessation is peerless excellence, an excellent state of wellbeing that will never relapse back to where it started.

For us, what we can do in daily life, when we wake up in the morning immediately turn to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Turn to the Buddha and immediately recall Buddha’s immense qualities of being completely free from all suffering and being equipped with all necessary know-how to help others. Without any bias in a compassionate way then you realise indeed Buddha is somebody that you can fall back on to help you and to help all other aged mother sentient beings who are involuntarily undergoing all sorts of suffering and – while undergoing the result of past karma – creating more negative karma to undergo more suffering in the future. Therefore, turn to the Buddha and go for refuge for yourself and for the sake of all beings.

We turn to the Buddha, from the bony depths of your heart in the knowledge of the Buddhas ability to help one and all. Turning to the Buddha for guidance, embracing the guidance and applying the guidance to daily life has the ability to set one free completely from cyclic existence, from the cycle of rebirth, death and life. If one can be freed and help achieve the state of nirvana by going to refuge, then it goes for saying that such a process will incidentally fulfil your temporal wishes – better health, more riches, more fame, these will just come by without having to be especially prayed for.

If you have been to India and to the markets early when the shops open, the Indian and Tibetan shopkeepers, as soon as they pull the shutter up they will burn incense and at least half an hour will be spent by them praying quite fervently, they believe in the power of their gods to give them a great day in terms of business.

If these people go to such lengths praying to their gods for money and profit that day, and they truly believe that, then the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and Dharma are beyond material concerns. If we pray to them and turn to them and make whatever wishes, there is no doubt all those wishes will be met. For example, we can turn to them any time of the day, even when we are eating and drinking we can turn to them. That is why before we eat and drink we say grace, we offer to the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, Gurus, and Deities. We make such simple offerings in the knowledge of their power to help us to get out samsara and therefore making constant connection with the three jewels even at the time of eating and drinking will go a long way in forming that connection with the three jewels.

Meditation

I would like you to send five minutes meditating on love and compassion. You all have heard about love and compassion, so love is a positive spiritual emotion wishing all sentient beings happiness, wellbeing and the means for that. Compassion is also a positive spiritual emotion wishing all sentient beings the earliest freedom, relief from suffering and the causes of suffering. Make that wish to all sentient beings. Why? All are closely connected to one in that according to Buddha's perspective, all sentient beings have been one's mother in the continuum of beginningless existence.